

VZCZCXRO8838
RR RUEHCHI RUEHDT RUEHHM RUEHNH
DE RUEHGO #1722/01 3310951
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 270951Z NOV 06
FM AMEMBASSY RANGOON
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 5455
INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 1254
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 0041
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 4400
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 3633
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 7139
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 4739
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0613
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 2950

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 RANGOON 001722

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/MLA, G/PRM

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [EAID](#) [BM](#)

SUBJECT: A TALE OF TWO SITTWES: BURMA'S ETHNIC TENSIONS

REF: A. RANGOON 0668

[1](#)B. RANGOON 0235

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary. Non-Buddhist ethnic minorities in Burma's Rakhine State face the worst of times, with a flat economy, no citizenship rights, and no freedom to seek better opportunities elsewhere. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), World Food Program (WFP), UN High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR), and a number of Japanese and European NGOs work actively in northern parts of the state to provide assistance to the Rohingyas, but Muslim and Hindu residents of other parts of Rakhine state face many of the same oppressive controls. Many of the Arakhan Buddhist majority fear population growth among Muslim Rohingyas more than the regime's heavy military presence in their state. Despite the state's potentially lucrative offshore oil and natural gas fields, today only major population centers receive any state-supplied electricity, and even those only get a few hours each night before an 8 pm curfew. End summary.

[1](#)2. (U) DCM joined 14 diplomats from other Rangoon missions and 4 UN officials on an FAO and WFP-organized trip to Rakhine State October 27-30. The trip focused on UN humanitarian assistance in Northern Rakhine State (NRS), two overcrowded districts along the Bangladesh border whose population is literally interned by the Burmese military. The diplomats also visited the historic city of Mrauk-U and spent two nights in the state capital of Sittwe, where Muslims face many of the same restrictions their brothers and sisters suffer in NRS.

Living Under the Gun

[1](#)3. (SBU) While most Rohingya Muslims are confined to the districts of Maungdaw and Buthithaung in Northern Rakhine State (NRS), and not permitted any real freedom of movement (ref A), Muslims living in the capital city of Sittwe and other parts of the state said that they, too, are held captive by rigid GOB restrictions on their travel and activities. Local residents estimate about one million Muslims are crowded into NRS, and a further 300,000 Muslims, also primarily Rohingyas, live elsewhere in Rakhine State. Hindu residents of the state, most of who are ethnically Indian, suffer the same lack of citizenship rights and restrictions on travel as their Muslims neighbors.

¶4. (SBU) The Imam of the oldest mosque in Sittwe told us that no Muslim resident of the city is permitted on the streets after 8 pm, and confirmed that he and most of the Muslims in his local community are not permitted to leave the city limits at all. In his youth, the Imam was able to travel to Rangoon but, he said, "I have not been anywhere for 20 years now." The regime has boarded up most of the rooms of his historic mosque, located next to the State Museum in central Sittwe, and worshippers are not allowed to pray inside it, but one area of foyer is left open to show tourists the structure's elaborate century-old architecture.

The Imam said there were about 100 mosques in Sittwe District, but the authorities only permitted a few to remain open, and none could be repaired without permission. He also told those of us who broke away from regime "escorts" to visit the mosque that he knew he would be called in for interrogation as a result of our visit, but he was still delighted that we had visited.

Across a Great Divide

¶5. (SBU) The Muslim residents of NRS and Sittwe were delighted to meet with us and expressed no hostility toward the Arakhanese Buddhists with whom they share Rakhine State. In contrast, DCM spoke to many young Arakhanese students and laborers who were mildly critical of the GOB but spent most of their time warning of the "Muslim threat" their province faced, claiming the regime's heavy military presence was needed to protect the Arakhan people. When pressed to explain how the unarmed Rohingyas threatened them, one young student told us, "They breed too fast."

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¶6. (U) Faced with little else to occupy their time, the residents of NRS do take procreation seriously. According to WFP, the average number of children in NRS families is 8.5. Few Rohingyas can afford to educate all of their children, and preference is given to boys; UNHCR estimates that about 70 percent of the women in NRS have never attended school.

¶7. (SBU) Surprisingly, in some respects, the residents of NRS enjoy more control over their local communities than in other parts of Burma. Even though most residents are not allowed to possess National Identity Cards or passports, and Burmese soldiers guard every key bridge and intersection, the long arm of the regime does not reach into village life as pervasively as elsewhere. In most Rohingya communities, unofficial community leaders are selected directly by the population. Most serve ten-year terms and then hand over the duties to another community elder. We were told the "grayest beard" among local heads of households is usually selected, but in two villages the headmen we met were middle-aged men who had snuck into Bangladesh and back, earning extra respect and extra hard currency for their endeavors.

¶8. (SBU) As a result of the informal election system in NRS, the treatment of women varies widely from village to village.

At one we visited, women wore heavy black clothing and full Saudi-style veils and hid from outsiders. However, in a village just two kilometers away, women wore no head covering and mingled freely with local males and foreigners alike. At the next village, a few kilometers away, a group of women wearing only headscarves stopped to watch our unusual diplomat entourage until the Philippine Ambassador asked if she could take their photo. The women agreed, but a young bearded man zoomed up to them on a bicycle and spoke harshly, and they quickly vanished into a nearby shelter.

"The Island of Beautiful Women"

¶9. (U) Several sources during the trip mentioned another location in Rakhine state where the local population is

isolated, in this case free to travel but with no outsiders allowed to see their island. Man Aung Island, located west of Ramree Island and the town of Taungoo, is off-limits to foreigners and to most Burmese visitors. Most Burmese refer to the island as Mein Ma Hla Kyun, "The Island of Beautiful Women," because its original inhabitants are said to be Portuguese, Dutch and British buccaneers who settled there centuries ago and married locals. The inhabitants of the island speak a dialect of the Rakhine language and, although almost all are Buddhist, they also retain traditional customs closer to those of Muslims in northern Rakhine.

¶10. (U) Today, somewhere between 100,000 and 200,000 inhabitants eke out a living on the island, through fishing and raising rice, chili, corn, roselle, and goats. The island is close to the potential oil and gas field in the Bay of Bengal (ref B), and oil can be found near the surface in some parts of the island. With no outside investment, islanders still draw the oil out of the ground the old-fashioned way, sucking it out with bamboo tubes and bottling it to sell for use in oil lamps and crude home-made generators. They trade some seafood, agricultural products, and oil with neighboring islanders and a few traders, but there almost no shops on the island and most residents have no access to any currency.

¶11. (U) With no real prospects for local employment, many women on the island have departed to work as prostitutes in Burmese and Thai cities. According to informal estimates, the HIV/AIDS infection rate on Mein Ma Hla Kyun may be double the national rate, already alarmingly high. The GOB restricts travel to the island by patrolling the two island towns where boats can easily dock, and also by monitoring the destinations of people departing from Taungoo and nearby Ramree Island. The island once had an airport, but it was closed in the late 1980s and has fallen into disrepair.

What Can Be Done

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¶12. (U) International organizations and NGOs try their best to address the critical food, health and social needs of people crowded into Northern Rakhine State, but until the Government of Burma is prepared to treat the Rohingyas as people with rights, and allow them to hold identity cards, the pressures of overpopulation and limited education will only create more misery. FAO estimates that it will take seven to ten years of sustained international funding to make NRS self-sufficient in food; stabilizing its explosive population growth and providing meaningful work and educational opportunities to its residents will take even longer. The Japanese focus most of their funding today on infrastructure, building sorely needed bridges and roadways to link remote villagers in NRS's watery delta environment. European donors support much of the current NGO work in health care and agriculture.

¶13. (U) UNHCR and FAO reps repeatedly encouraged the U.S. to make a greater contribution to the people of NRS, identifying maternal health training and other ways to help empower women (through handicrafts, child nutrition and learn-for-food programs) as among their most critical needs. They also appealed for donations of reading materials in any language. Since most Rohingyas are illiterate, they said that books and magazines with photos and pictures were ideal, but Burmese, Bengali, Arabic or English texts would also be suitable. Deforestation is also a significant concern. With no current sources of fuel and no available electricity, most residents spend several hours each day collecting firewood for cooking. Much of NRS' forests have vanished in the last five years and WFP officials estimate the remainder will be gone before the year 2010 if alternatives are not provided. The FAO's local rep promotes the use of cattle dung as fuel, based on his success with similar projects in Afghanistan and Sudan.

¶14. (SBU) COMMENT: The Embassy will continue to pursue every opportunity to visit Rakhine State. Unfortunately, the regime tightly restricts access to the region, perhaps realizing how truly dreadful the situation there has become. Fortunately, UN agencies and international NGOs, once inside, have more latitude to work there than elsewhere in Burma. We appreciate PRM's willingness to assist and will continue to offer suggestions worth exploring. End comment.
VILLAROSA